

The Miniatures in the Rabbula Gospels

Postscripta to a Recent Book

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In the year 586, the monk Rabbula of the Beth Zagba monastery near Apamea, Syria, finished copying the text now known by his name: the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56). At the start of the manuscript are fourteen illuminated folios: folios 1a through 2a have three full-page miniatures (the Selection of Matthias, the Virgin with Child, and the standing figures of Ammonius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea). The following two pages contain the letter of Eusebius to Carpianus on two columns, framed by a border with interlaces and shells. Folios 3b through 12b depict the canon tables between arches accompanied in the margins by vignettes from the New Testament and portraits of prophets. The last four pages (fols. 13a–14b) contain a new series of full-page illustrations showing the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Ascension, Christ enthroned with four monks, and Pentecost. These images may be likened to an insert taken from another work. Furthermore, much of the original surface of these last four folios has been overpainted by inexperienced hands.

The 1959 Facsimile Edition

The manuscript is well known thanks to the facsimile edition that appeared in 1959 with accompanying commentary written by Carlo Cecchelli, Giuseppe Furlani, and Mario Salmi. In time their publication gained the

status of a reliable *editio princeps*.¹ The complete reproduction of the miniatures in magnificent color plates has been a valuable contribution to scholarship, but the legacy of the commentary has been less than benign. It has stunted, if not thwarted, investigation into the date, style, and iconography of the illustrations, which are a touchstone in the study of early Christian art. The commentary perpetuates two errors. The first regards the style of the miniatures: following in the footsteps of Josef Strzygowski, the authors stress the highly expressive style taken to typify the art of sixth-century Syria. The second error is more fatal: the authors claim that the date and place of production, the Zagba monastery in 586, applies not only to the text, but also to the miniatures, a position which was not endorsed by the respected scholar Jules Leroy.² The fact that the reproductions, though accurate in color, are not especially

1 The facsimile reproduces only the illuminated pages of the manuscript: *The Rabbula Gospels: Facsimile Edition of the Miniatures of the Syriac Manuscript Plut. 1.56 in the Medicean-Laurentian Library*, ed. C. Cecchelli, G. Furlani, and M. Salmi (Olten-Lausanne, 1959). The facsimile also contains the following essays: Furlani, "The Manuscript of Rabbula," 9–21; Cecchelli, "The Iconography of the Laurentian Syriac Gospels," 23–82; and Salmi, "Problems of Style," 83–89.

2 J. Leroy, "L'auteur des miniatures du manuscrit de Florence Plut. 1.56: Codex Rabulensis," in *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (July–October 1954): 278–86; idem, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient: Contribution à l'étude de l'iconographie des églises*



FIG. 1 The woman with the issue of blood, detail of Jesus. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 5b (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 2 Jesus and Peter, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 8a (photo courtesy of BML)

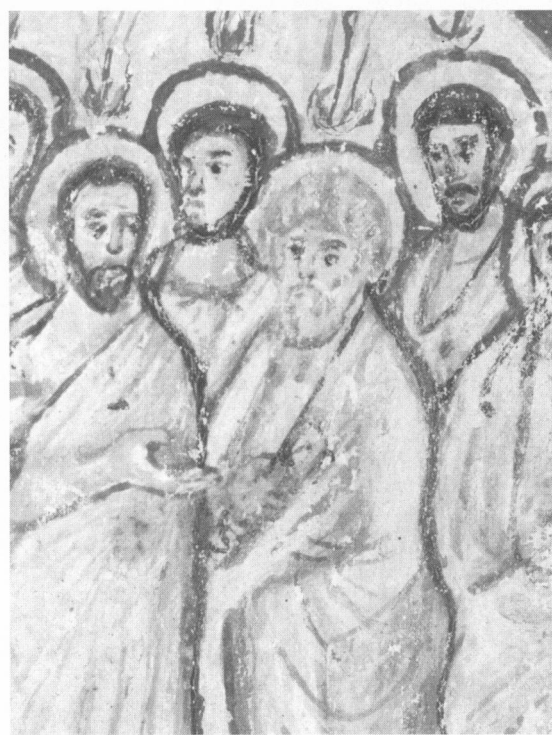


FIG. 3 Pentecost, detail of the apostles. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 14b (photo courtesy of BML)

crisp may absolve art historians working from the facsimile, but not those who have consulted the manuscript itself.³ A study published in 2008 has provided scholars with a thorough reexamination of the manuscript and a complete set of its miniatures.⁴ This article draws on some of that study's reappraisals.

The most glaring mistakes made by the art historians responsible for the facsimile begin with style. First, they fail to notice the overpainting of the miniatures. Second, they do not realize that the miniatures of folio 13, with the Crucifixion on the recto and the Ascension on the verso, differ in style from the other miniatures on folios 1 through 14. One need only compare the group of three soldiers dividing Christ's tunic at the foot of the cross with the Communion of the Apostles flanking the canon table on folio 11b (figs. 4–6) to see the difference. The illusionistic rendering of the soldiers is the work of an artist who has mastered the Hellenistic tradition of perspective, whereas the depiction of the Apostles in superimposed files shown in reverse perspective accords with medieval practice. Added to this are differing portrayals of Christ—as a young man with short, curly hair in the scene of the Communion, but in the Crucifixion as a man with shoulder-length hair, clearly visible despite the later overpainting of his features (fig. 7).⁵ Is there a context for this now obvious lapse in judgment?

de langue syriaque, Institut Français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 77 (Paris, 1964), 44.

3 See A. Grabar, "Art chrétien en Syrie: Compte rendu de J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient* (Paris, 1964)," *CahArch* 19 (1969): 231–33; M. Mango, "Where was Beth Zagba?" in *Okeanos: Essays presented to Ihor Ševčenko on His Sixtieth Birthday by his Colleagues and Students*, ed. C. Mango and O. Pritsak, Harvard Ukrainian Studies 7 (Cambridge, 1983), 405–30; and D. H. Wright, "The Date and Arrangement of the Illustrations in the Rabbula Gospels," *DOP* 12 (1973): 197–208. The record of those who consulted the manuscript in Florence has now been made available online: <http://www.bmlonline.it/dedalus/manuscriptDetails.aspx?Holdinglocation=Plut.1.56> (accessed 27 June 2014).

4 *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula: Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. 1.56: L'illustrazione del Nuovo Testamento nella Siria del VI secolo*, ed. M. Bernabò, *Folia picta: Manoscritti miniati del Medioevo* 1 (Rome, 2008); reviews: G. Peers, *Speculum* 85 (2009): 635–36; M. A. Bilotta, *Alumina* 28 (January–March 2010): 17–23.

5 It might be added that the miniatures on fol. 13 are less damaged than the canon table miniatures; c.f. the Crucifixion on fol. 13a and the figures in the margins of the opposite fol. 12b.

In the years after the Second World War, Italian art history was dominated by the formal aesthetics of Benedetto Croce.⁶ Charles R. Morey, following his time spent as cultural attaché in Italy, gently rebuked Croce as a force

conditioning and restricting, in a certain sense, Italian writings in the field of art-history at the present time. . . . Nearly every Italian who writes on art seems to feel himself in the necessity of identifying himself as a pupil of Croce. . . . The result is a prevalent emphasis in Italian writing on the creative act in the work of art in accordance with Croce's theory that therein lies the essential artistic fact and a tendency to minimize the importance of content, environment and historical evolution.⁷

For the study of book illumination, Italian art historians (with the exception of Pietro Toesca, among very few others) developed no specific approach, generally ignoring the advances made in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European philology and archaeology. Research into images as entities specifically intended to illustrate words in the context of the manuscript book was generally unknown, as was codicology—the material description of the book, its quire divisions, ruling, hair and flesh sides, content, and lacunae. The Italian approach was instead directed toward aesthetic qualities in search of the creative hand of the "master," and an understanding of how his work related to that of other masters. Since illuminators were craftsmen simply copying other work, they failed to fulfil Croce's definition of an artist as the creator of unique works. A book illustration was considered to be merely a small painting, an example of the "minor arts" that stood in the shadow of the major ones of panel and mural painting. In addition, one result of the cultural autarchy of the Fascist years was that the work of foreign art historians, particularly those writing in English, was poorly represented in Italian libraries.⁸

6 See M. Bernabò, *Ossessioni bizantine e cultura artistica in Italia: Tra D'Annunzio, fascismo e dopoguerra* (Naples, 2003), 241–49.

7 C. R. Morey, "Art and the History of Art in Italy," *College Art Journal* 10 (1950): 219–22.

8 One of the very few exceptions was Bernard Berenson's library in the Villa I Tatti near Florence.



FIG. 4 Crucifixion, detail of the soldiers. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 13a (photo courtesy of BML).



FIG. 5 Canon 10 (Mk). Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 11b (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 6 Communion of the Apostles. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 11b (photo courtesy of BML)

Carlo Cecchelli was the facsimile edition's expert in Christian iconography. His essay on iconography in the Rabbula Gospels is a display of learning lacking any methodological perspective. He loses himself in trivial puzzles and pedantic speculation. On the scene of Christ's baptism in the Jordan (fig. 8), for instance, he writes that "after a very close inspection, we have come to the conclusion" that the yellow, vertical stroke next to Jesus represents "an actual painting on this page and in fact a flame." (It is in reality a yellow smear!) For Cecchelli, this detail points to a connection with the lost *Diatessaron* of Tatian.⁹ Giuseppe Furlani was the Syriac scholar on the facsimile team. He believed that a transcription and translation of the marginal inscriptions and those in the canon tables would have no bearing on the dating of the miniatures, so he ignored them. This decision has had lasting consequences. Study of the Syriac and Garshuni (Arabic written using the letters of the Syriac alphabet) inscriptions carried out for the 2008 edition of the manuscript provided the

9 Cecchelli, "Iconography" (n. 1 above), 13.



FIG. 7 Crucifixion, detail of Jesus. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 13a (photo courtesy of BML)

evidence for a complete revision of the book's history. The inscriptions show, first, that for eight centuries the leaves with the illustrations and those with the Gospel text were entirely separate, and, second, that the two parts were being read at separate locations distant from one another. The two were joined sometime between the end of the fourteenth century and the second half of the fifteenth. In fact, 1461/62 has been proposed as the date when the miniatures and illustrated canon tables were bound with the monk Rabbula's text.¹⁰

¹⁰ See the contributions of P. G. Borbone ("Codicologia, paleografia, aspetti storici," 23–58) and A. Mengozzi ("Le annotazioni in lingua araba sul codice di Rabbula," 59–66) in *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula* (n. 4 above), esp. 52 and 63–64. More recently, see P. G. Borbone, "L'itinéraire du 'Codex de Rabbula' selon ses notes marginales," in *Sur le pas des Araméens chrétiens: Mélanges offerts à Alain Desreumaux*, ed. F. B. Chatonnet and M. Debié, Cahiers des études syriaques 1 (Paris, 2010), 169–80.



FIG. 8 Canon 1, table 3. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 4b (photo courtesy of BML)

In addition to ignoring the inscriptions, Furlani paid no heed to the codicology, particularly the quire makeup.¹¹ Had he studied the quires, he would have discovered that the Rabbula Gospels is composed of three parts. It begins with the fourteen parchment leaves with miniatures and canons (fols. 1–14). Ten paper folios follow (fols. 15–19); written in the twelfth century, they carry liturgical pericopes. The third part is the parchment codex the monk Rabbula completed in the year 586; it is written on considerably thinner parchment than that used for the illuminated leaves. Its first quire is now defective, having lost the two outside

¹¹ In her contribution to the 2008 monograph ("The Rabbula Gospels and Other Manuscripts Produced in the Late Antique Levant," in *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula*, 113–26 and fig. 87) M. Mundell Mango follows Wright's untenable position that all the illuminated leaves were part of a single quire.

bifolios and with them Matthew 1:1–23 and 5:13–39.¹² Before entering the Medici library, the Gospel text must have been disassembled and rebound more than once. Since Rabbula added the Eusebian references to the Gospel text, the manuscript must originally have contained a set of canon tables, which were possibly lost at the same time as the leaves from the first gathering of Matthew's text.

The Original Sequence of the Miniatures

Anyone who leafs through the Rabbula Gospels will be struck by the evidence of indifference to its preservation that appears throughout the book. The illuminations are not only overcrowded, but also stained and soiled. One suspects that the book did not always benefit from the exalted reputation it enjoys today, nor did its centuries-old sacred images seem to command much respect. The Syrians to whom it was entrusted scraped the surface from four of the miniatures (fols. 6b, 7a, 7b, and 8a) to obtain space on which to write records, though folio 6b was never reused. The individual who repainted the miniatures much later was faced with a book that had suffered serious damage and that, because of frequent use, was worn and soiled at the outside margins, particularly the upper corners where the leaves were turned (fig. 9, right). This later artist's work was so poor that it could be characterized as further damaging the manuscript. He has dripped paint on folio 4b (fig. 8) leaving a yellow smear next to Christ in the Baptism scene. A dozen other yellow stains appear between the columns of the canons, and drops of blue paint appear on the numbers of the lower parts of the tables. In truth, one of the original illuminators responsible for the canons was equally unskilled, so it is occasionally difficult to tell which party was responsible for some of the gaucheries. A particularly important detail is the blue offprinting on the aedicula of the canon on folio 2a (fig. 11), which comes from the arch and peacock's tail of folio 1b (fig. 10). This transfer suggests that the book was out of use and kept tightly closed for a long period. We can surmise that the blue pigment was used by a restorer after the Gospel book entered the Medici collection. We know that in 1574 the manuscript was rebound in Florence. This is probably also when an effort was made to refresh the miniatures.

12 Borbone, "Codicologia," 25.



FIG. 9 Canon 10 (Jn), detail of Pilate. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 12b (photo courtesy of BML)

Let us now turn to the current state of the first fourteen folios, and what might have been their original relationship. As noted above, the style of the full-page miniatures on folio 13 differs from that of the rest of the illustration program. In the new edition of the manuscript, the Crucifixion and Ascension miniatures are attributed to a period from the end of the fifth century through the first quarter of the sixth.¹³ As for their production in Syria, this must be considered unsupported conjecture. The book for which the miniatures were produced could have been one copied in Greek. The *titulus* in Estrangela at the top of the cross in the Crucifixion miniature is a later addition. The place of the miniatures in the history of Syriac art must therefore be reassessed, if not discarded entirely.¹⁴ The first quire diagram, which reflects the current state of the manuscript, includes folio 13, but it is omitted from this discussion and from the reconstructions.

The diagram below reverses the order of the folios to reflect the retrograde nature of Syriac writing, with side a on the right and b on the left. Folios 12 through 14 were glued together to form a gathering, as were

13 M. Bernabò, "Fantasie novecentesche, ridipinture, fattura del codice," in *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula*, 19–21.

14 Idem, *Ossessioni bizantine* (n. 6 above), 253–60, esp. 256. Following in Strzygowski's footsteps, G. de Francovich, "L'arte siriana e il suo influsso sulla pittura medievale nell'Oriente e nell'Occidente," *Commentari* 2 (1951): 3–16, 75–92, 143–52, has been the gospel of the pan-Syriac fashion in Italian art historiography on Byzantium and the Middle Ages.

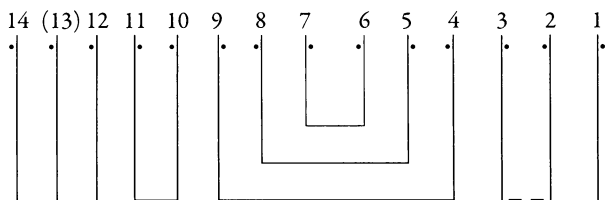


FIG. 10 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 1b, detail (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 11 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 2a, detail (photo courtesy of BML)

folios 1 to 3. Folio 1 is illustrated on the recto (Selection of Matthias) and verso (Virgin with Christ), whereas folios 2 and 3 contain the portraits of Ammonius and Eusebius (fol. 2a), the letter of Eusebius explaining the tables (fols. 2b–3a), and the first of the canons (fol. 3b). The diagram shows folios 2 and 3 conjoined by a dashed line (to indicate that this bifolio is hypothetical), but folio 1 as a single leaf. The hair and flesh sides of the leaves are identified in the diagrams (the hair side marked with •), but there is a caveat: owing to heavy use that has resulted in wear and soiling, the two sides are often difficult to differentiate. Folios 12 through 14 can be identified as hair or flesh with some assurance.



The set of illuminated leaves consists of a bifolio (fols. 2 and 3) with the beginning of the Eusebian apparatus followed by a ternion (fols. 4–9) containing canon 1 (part 2) through canon 7, and then another bifolio (fols. 10 and 11) with canons 8 through 10 (Mk). Folio 12 contains the remainder of canon 10 (Lk, Jn). The scene on folio 14a is a dedicatory miniature showing Christ enthroned receiving two books from a group of four monks, all depicted within a simplified *tholos*.¹⁵ This dedication scene comes immediately at the end of the Eusebian apparatus. On the verso of the leaf (fol. 14b) is Pentecost. The story of Matthias's selection, which is the subject of the miniature on the leaf now bound as fol. 1a, is related in Acts 1:15–26 as an event preceding

15 All the same, in the set of canon tables in the Ējmiacin Gospels (Erevan, Patriarchal Library, cod. 2374), the last canon (fol. 5a) is followed by a final page with a similar four-column *tholos*: C. Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanontafeln: Kunstgeschichtliche Studien über die eusebianische Evangelien-Konkordanz in den vier ersten Jahrhunderten ihrer Geschichte* (Gothenburg, 1938), pls. 23–24.

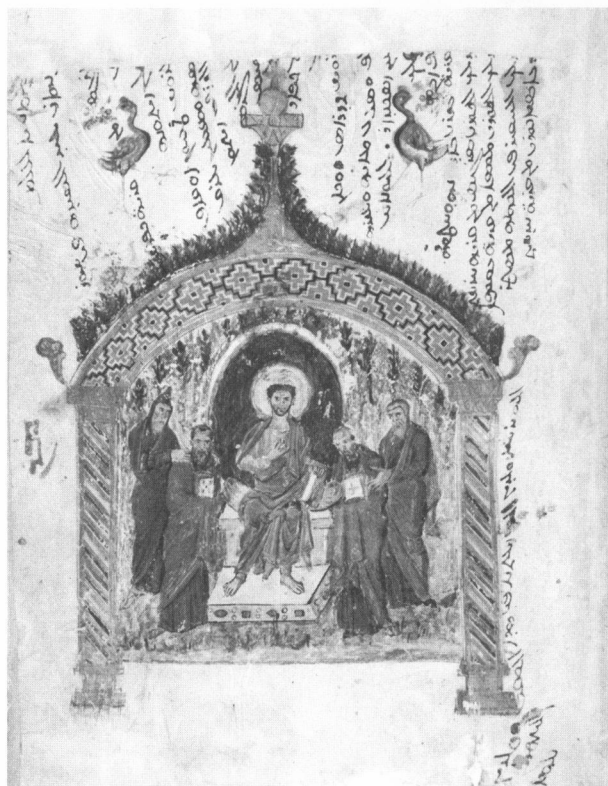


FIG. 12 Christ enthroned with four unidentified monks. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 14a (photo courtesy of BML)

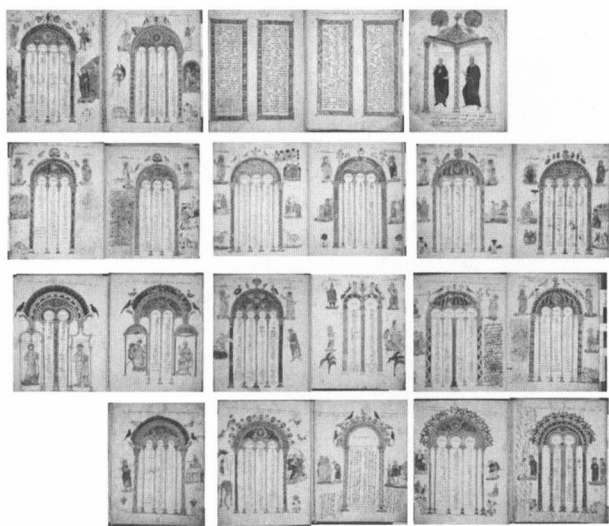
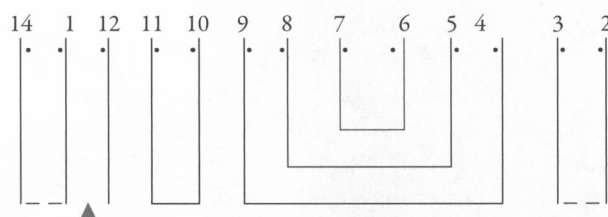


FIG. 13 Possible first-volume reconstruction of the sequence of illuminated folios now in the Rabbula Gospels.

Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Note that Gregory's law is not observed in the sequence of folios 12 to 14, but it seems that it was never observed in Syriac manuscripts.¹⁶ Even if folio 13 is ignored, the present order cannot be taken as original. Folios 1 and 14 are evidently bound incorrectly. It is most likely that during the 1574 rebinding, the leaf with the Selection of Matthias and the Virgin and Christ was mistakenly moved from the end of the sequence to the beginning. (It is less plausible that the incorrect ordering occurred while the manuscript was in the collection of the Maronite patriarchate.) But in addition, the illustration of two scenes from Acts suggests that the source of the leaves (excepting fol. 13) was a copy of the New Testament, not the Four Gospels. Such a New Testament could have been a one- or two-volume edition; examples of both survive from early Syria.¹⁷ In the proposed reconstruction below the leaves have been arranged in narrative order; the recto and verso of folio 1 (a singleton above) are reversed so that the Virgin with Christ precedes the Selection of Matthias. This leaf is joined to folio 14 (also now a singleton) to form a bifolio with Pentecost following the Selection of Matthias and the dedication miniature ending the series. The opening quires would be a bifolio, a ternion, a bifolio, a single leaf, and a bifolio, as shown below, where it is assumed that such a manuscript was a single volume.



In this hypothetical reconstruction the Virgin and Child miniature on folio 1a (presently fol. 1b) appears out of place following the canon tables (▲ on the diagram marks the disjuncture). The problem is resolved if the lost New Testament was a two-volume edition

16 I wish to thank Pier Giorgio Borbone and Grigory Kessel for their remarks on Gregory's law in Syriac manuscripts.

17 For two-volume editions of the New Testament handed down from early Syria, see B.L. cod. add. 14472 from the 6th–7th century (M. Mundell Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium: The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* [Baltimore, 1986], no. 89, pp. 260–61). Further references can be found in Bernabò, “Fantasie novecentesche” (n. 13 above), 4 n. 13.

with illustrations in each volume. If so, then folios 2 through 12 (the Letter of Eusebius, prophet portraits, and canon tables) would have appeared at the beginning of the volume containing the Four Gospels; the second volume, containing the Acts and Epistles, would have been illustrated with the standing Virgin holding Christ, followed by the two scenes from Acts (Selection of Matthias and Pentecost), and closing with the dedicatory miniature (the monks offering two codices to Christ). However, this sequence places the Selection of Matthias facing Pentecost, which may not have yielded an aesthetically satisfying double-page spread.

The two-volume hypothesis seems to me the more convincing. In the scene depicting four monks offering the book to Christ (fol. 14a; fig. 12), the two monks in the front row each hold a volume in their hands. The volume on the right is decorated with a red cross, while a rosette (?) and four diamond-shaped corner buckles or metal studs adorn the volume on the left. The first volume of a possible two-volume set would have contained the Four Gospels and would have been ordered in the following way (see reconstruction shown in fig. 13):

- 1st folio: Eusebius and Ammonius / Epistle of Eusebius to Carpianus (now fol. 2);
- 2nd folio: Epistle of Eusebius / Canon 1, pt. 1 (now fol. 3);
- 3rd folio: Canon 1, pt. 2 / Canon 1, pt. 3 (now fol. 4);
- 4th folio: Canon 2, pt. 1 / Canon 2, pt. 2 (now fol. 5);
- 5th folio: Canon 2, pt. 3 / Canon 2, pt. 4 (now fol. 6);
- 6th folio: Canon 3 / Canon 4 (now fol. 7);
- 7th folio: Canon 5, pt. 1 / Canon 5, pt. 2 (now fol. 8);
- 8th folio: Canon 6 / Canon 7 (now fol. 9);
- 9th folio: Canon 8 / Canon 9 (now fol. 10);
- 10th folio: Canon 10 (Mt) / Canon 10 (Mk) (now fol. 11);
- 11th folio: Canon 10 (Lk) / Canon 10 (Jn) (now fol. 12)

The schema of quires follows everything to the right of the ▲ in the diagram above. The second volume would have held Acts and other texts, with its illuminations as follows (see reconstruction shown at fig. 14):

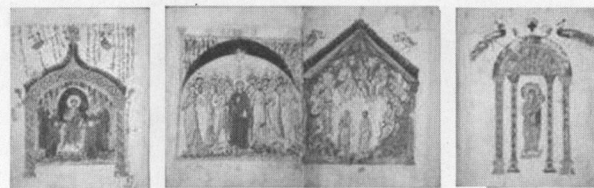


FIG. 14 Possible second-volume reconstruction of the sequence of illuminated folios now in the Rabbula Gospels.

1st folio: Virgin and Child / Selection of Matthias (now fol. 1, but recto and verso sides reversed)

2nd folio: Pentecost / Jesus and monks (now fol. 14, but recto and verso sides reversed)

We can thus reconstruct one illuminated bifolio (according to the diagram above, to the left of the ▲).

In this two-volume reconstruction, all the illuminated quires open with a flesh side.¹⁸ Second, the sequence opening the Four Gospels volume begins with the folio showing the double portrait of Ammonius of Alexandria, on the right, and Eusebius of Caesarea on the left (Ammonius' work anticipated Eusebius' *harmonia evangelica*) (fig. 15). The portrait of Ammonius at the head of the Eusebian Letter to Carpianus may seem strange, considering that in later Byzantine Gospels Eusebius is usually paired with Carpianus.¹⁹ If Ammonius were not named in an inscription, then we would be inclined to identify him as Carpianus. The two Christian authors are standing, clad in long monk's robes; Eusebius is depicted frontally as Ammonius turns toward him. Ammonius is a much larger figure, but on close inspection it appears that he has been repainted (fig. 16). Originally he too was depicted frontally. Some change occurred during the course of illustration, which may even call into question who was first represented standing next to Eusebius, Ammonius or Carpianus. Ammonius is mentioned at the start of Eusebius's letter only as the scholar who transmitted to us a single narrative from four Gospels.²⁰ Carpianus is otherwise unknown outside the letter. As its addressee he ought to have been represented in the attitude of

18 Borbone, "Codicologia" (n. 10 above), 26.

19 See Bernabò, "Fantasie novecentesche" (n. 13 above), 13.

20 PG 22:1275–78.

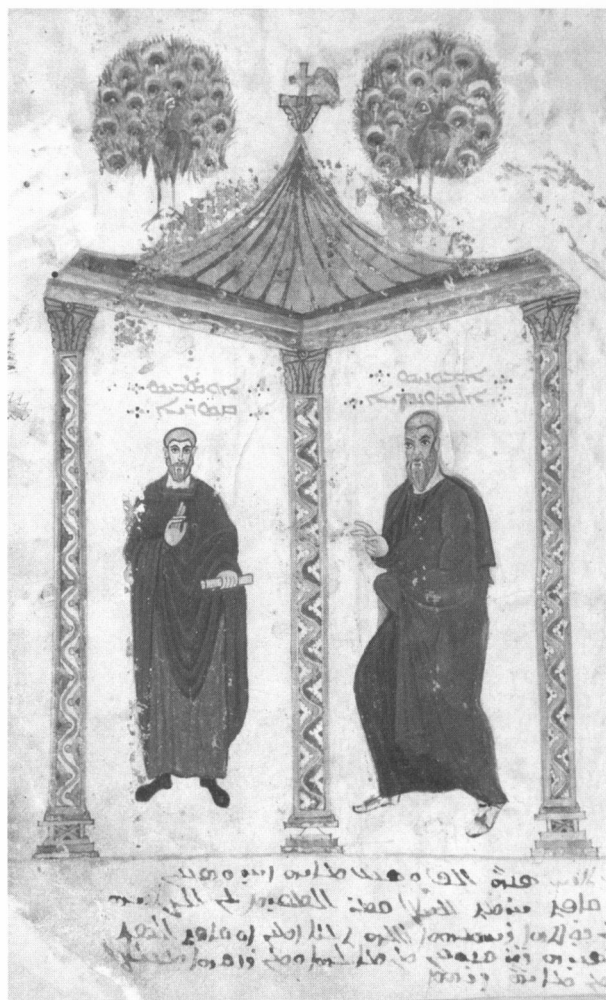


FIG. 15 Eusebius (left) and Ammonius (right). Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 2a (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 16 Ammonius. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 2a (photo courtesy of BML)

receiving a letter, but this is not the case.²¹ The issue of a possible alteration of the illustration program must consider the wider perspective provided by the decoration of the canon tables.

21 See, for example, Hypatius receiving Theodoret's epistle in the preface to the Octateuchs: Octateuch cod. Vat. gr. 747, fol. 12r, and cod. 8 in the Seraglio Library, fol. 22v (K. Weitzmann and M. Bernabò, with the collaboration of R. Tarasconi, *The Byzantine Octateuchs, The Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint* 2 [Princeton, NJ, 1999], figs. 13 and 15).

Iconography

Scholars have viewed the miniatures of the Rabbula Gospels as evidence of an expressive style dominating sixth-century Syriac art, and as the fruit of a school of refined exegesis. The miniatures require that we set aside such notions to gain a basic understanding of early Christian book production. The narrative scenes and the prophets in the canon table margins are painted in a style that parallels art of the Justinianic period. They accord convincingly with sixth-century



FIG. 17 Canon 1, table 1. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 4a (photo courtesy of BML)

mosaic pavements of Palestine, so a date in the second quarter or middle of the sixth century seems most likely.²² The pictorial narratives accompanying the canon tables do not indicate an artist with a sophisticated viewpoint. Subjects may relate to the passages signaled by numbers, but the relationships are casual. For instance, part 1 of canon 1 (fig. 17) contains episodes found in all four Gospels, but the Annunciation to Mary, which is painted in the margin, is an episode narrated only by Luke. It should, therefore, be depicted much later, in the margin of canon 10 (Lk), which enumerates the events unique to his Gospel. Moreover, the story of Joshua ordering the sun and the moon to stand still, shown in the upper right corner, has no connection to the Annunciation. The Entry into Jerusalem is found in all four Gospels, but it is

painted in the margin of the table of canon 10 (Mk), which contains events unique to Mark (see fig. 5). The healing scene accompanying the canon with episodes unique to Mark shows an event described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In sum, there is no reason to look for a sophisticated program that presupposes a learned patron or programmer.

The images comprise a summary of Christ's life—although one that excludes the parables—shown in roughly chronological order. If there is any particular emphasis, then it is on Christ's healing power. In the series of twenty marginal episodes before the Passion, Jesus is shown healing the widow's son, the paralytic at Bethesda, the woman with the issue of blood, the bent woman, the man with a withered hand, the daughter of Jairus, the Gadarene demoniacs, the servant of the centurion of Capernaum, and the maimed, lame, and blind. As a whole, the scenes accompanying the canon tables are a selection of popular subjects, and the choice is mirrored by an often lively, naively realistic style. In the Communion of the Apostles and Entry into Jerusalem (see fig. 5), Jesus is not portrayed according to the Nazarene type, with black hair down to his shoulders, but as an ascetic with short, curly hair, as he is also portrayed in the dedication scene (see fig. 12). He appears to be almost humble and self-effacing, as when he bows in front of the disciples who take Communion or rides the donkey through the gate of Jerusalem. Presumably the portraits of Old Testament figures and the narratives from the Gospels were taken from existing models, not invented for the sake of Gospel harmony. It should be noted that the Rossano and Sinope Gospels provide no useful parallels in either style or iconography. Any search for the tradition represented by the compositions bound with Rabbula's text must be directed elsewhere.

Style

Although we cannot say that the canons are the work of a learned designer constructing an argument in pictures and numbers, the Rabbula canons are the most lavish to have survived from early Christian Syria. The illuminator delineates from one to four vertical files using columns and arches, each set surmounted by an embracing arch that creates a kind of tympanum, which is decorated by a variety of patterns. Birds and other animals appear at the column bases

22 Bernabò, "Fantasie novecentesche," 16–19.

and, more often, on the embracing arches and acroteria. Prophets, patriarchs, and New Testament scenes occupy the top corners and sides of the tables. Parallels for the layout can be found far and wide: the sixth-century fragment in London (British Library, cod. add. 5111), the Armenian Ējmiacin Gospels of 989 CE (Erevan, Patriarchal Library, cod. 229), and in many Latin and Byzantine manuscripts.²³ Still, there is an impression of unfortunate overcrowding (as, for example, on fol. 4b, with the prophets David and Solomon, the Nativity, Baptism in the Jordan, and Massacre of the Innocents), which again raises the question of a change in the commission and/or a change of illuminators. Canons 7 and 8 (fols. 9b and 10a) integrate the Four Evangelists into the architecture that frames the lists of numbers. The remaining seventeen tables have a total of twenty-four portraits of Old Testament figures and twenty-four subjects from the Gospels; of the latter, three have been partially erased (fols. 6b, 7a, and 8a) and a twenty-fifth (fol. 7b) has been completely erased. Plants and animals are represented next to the column bases at the bottom of the tables on folios 3b, 4a, 5a, 5b, 6a, 6b (one erased), 7a (one erased), 7b (one erased), 8a (one erased), 8b, 10b, 11a, 12a (only a flower on the right margin), and 12b. These decorative elements must have been painted after the portraits and narrative scenes were finished because they are absent from folios 9a and 11b (see figs. 18 and 5, respectively), and from places where the narrative scenes occupy the lower part of the leaf, for example on folio 4b (see fig. 8).

The overpainting of the miniatures impedes analysis. Nevertheless, it is certain that the illumination was not the work of a single hand—at least three were involved. The representation of Peter and Christ on folio 9a (fig. 18) is a masterly creation. The layer of gold paint inside the edges of the columns and the diamond-like motif inside the tympanum are presumably the work of the same hand. The design of the table, however, is disappointing. It was laid out with a compass, as the pricking clearly shows, but the distances were miscalculated. The space between the outside capitals is insufficient for four arches, and so the one at the far left is truncated while the one at the right fails to rest properly on its capital. Even the embracing



FIG. 18 Canon 6. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 9a (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 19 Canon 5, table 2, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 8b (photo courtesy of BML)

23 Reproductions in Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanontafeln* (n. 15 above).

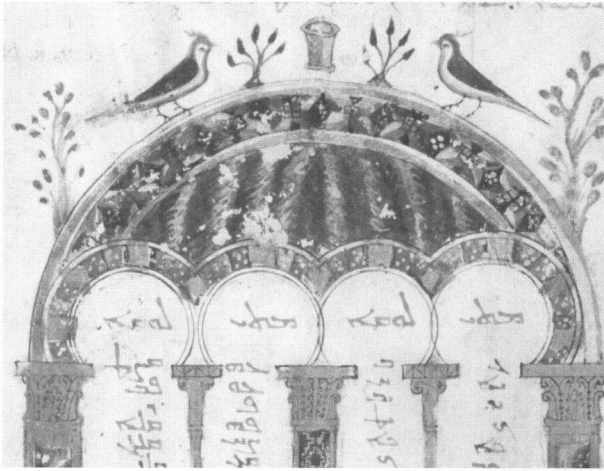


FIG. 20 Canon 5, table 1, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 8a (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 22 Canon 8, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 10a (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 21 Canon 7, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 9b (photo courtesy of BML)



FIG. 23 Canon 1, table 2, detail. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.56, Rabbula Gospels, fol. 4a (photo courtesy of BML)

arch does not sit squarely on the abacus to the left. The use of gold on folio 8b (fig. 19) is again accurate work, neatly filling the geometrical pattern of the columns and the leaves and birds of the capitals. The same care is apparent in the drawing and filling of the two-handled amphora at the top of the arches. This is the work of the sixth-century illuminators that remained untouched when the tables were crudely painted over centuries later. Figures 19 through 23 show a selection of birds, ornaments, and architectural details. The tympanum of folio 8a (fig. 20) shows the work of an inexperienced sixth-century hand, possibly that of a fledgling illuminator uncertain in the use of the compass to lay out the table. The layout of the canons on folios 9b and 10a (figs. 21 and 22), points to an experienced illuminator, but the filling in blue and gold on folio 10a is probably by another. Folio 4a (fig. 23) reveals similar inconsistencies, which points to two hands sharing responsibility for the tables. Located at the corners of the tympana are the Old Testament figures, painted frontally; they must be assigned to a third painter (see, e.g., fols. 4a and 9a; figs. 17, 23, and 18). The portraits of Eusebius and Ammonius on folio 2a (see figs. 15 and 16) and the Pentecost on folio 14b (see fig. 3) are examples of the same style. In sum, a team of three—possibly four²⁴—painters was responsible for the illumination of folios 1 through 12 and 14 of the Rabbula Gospels. One of them was probably an apprentice, who prepared the architecture for a number of canon tables and applied gold and paint in some parts of them. But the essential point is that the Rabbula Gospels is not a homogeneous work made in 586 by a Syrian monk.

The Arches of the Canon Tables

In the Biblioteca Laurenziana are two other copies of the Gospels in Syriac: cod. plut. 1.40 (756 CE) and plut. 1.58 (9th century?).²⁵ Both contain the Eusebian letter and the canons (figs. 24 and 25). Their design is

similar to that of the Rabbula canons: simple arches form patterns such as $\cap\cap$, $\cap\cap\cap$, or $\cap\cap\cap\cap$, and columns frame the vertical rows of numbers. But neither of these two copies of the Gospels contains portraits or scenes in the canons or elsewhere. The canons of cod. plut. 1.58 are decorated with birds (fols. 5b and 6a), a basket of loaves (fols. 6b and 7a), and leaves springing from the capitals.²⁶ The Gospels of cod. plut. 1.58 have an initial quinion with the Epistle to Carpius written on two folios (fols. 2b and 3a) and seventeen pages with canon tables, the last folio being the work of an unprofessional hand. Up to folio 10b, the succession of leaves and canons is exactly the same as those in cod. plut. 1.56 and cod. plut. 1.58; we may even imagine that the lost original canon tables of the Rabbula Gospels were probably like those in cod. plut. 1.58. Cod. plut. 1.40 has a quaternion with all the prefatory material: the Epistle on folios 9b and 10a and twelve pages with arches and lists of concordance on folios 10b through 16a (fol. 9a was originally blank and fol. 16b has the beginning of the Gospels). Whereas the recto of the first folio with the Epistle in the Rabbula codex (fol. 2a) has the portraits of Eusebius and Carpius, the text appeared alone in plut. 1.40 (fol. 9a) and plut. 1.58 (fol. 2a). A similar layout is seen in the seventh-century Gabbula codex (Berlin, Preuss. Staatsbibliothek, cod. Phillips 1388).²⁷ The two Laurentian Gospels, cod. plut. 1.40 and 1.56, and the Gabbula Gospels are three unpretentious editions of decorated canon tables. The Gospels of cod. Paris. Syr. 33 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Diyarbakir Gospels, and the Damascus Gospels show a richer level of decoration, with plants and animals along their margins.²⁸ In addition, cod. Paris. Syr. 33 has a few narrative scenes, but they are reduced to the most essential characters. The accuracy of both the scribe and painter of cod. plut. 1.58 is praiseworthy. The columns of the tables are all the same height (ca. 18.7 cm);

24 See Bernabò, "Miniature e decorazione," in *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula* (n. 4 above), 130–33.

25 Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures* (n. 2 above), 128ff.; P. G. Borbone, "Il codice di Rabbula e i suoi compagni: su alcuni manoscritti siriaci della Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (mss. Pluteo 1.12; Pluteo 1.40; Pluteo 1.56; Pluteo 1.58)," and E. Braidà, "Duas lineas oleorum prope oppidum Besciara: le localizzazioni del codice siriano Pluteo 1.58 (ca IX sec.) della Biblioteca Medicea

Laurenziana," both in *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 32 (2009): 245–53 and 255–69, respectively.

26 High-quality reproductions of all the pages of these codices are now available on the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana's website.

27 Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanontafeln*, 126–27, pls. 149–58; Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures*, 129.

28 Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanontafeln*, pls. 114–28; Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures*, figs. 35–42; *Rabbula Gospels* (n. 1 above), pl. 18, figs. 1–3.

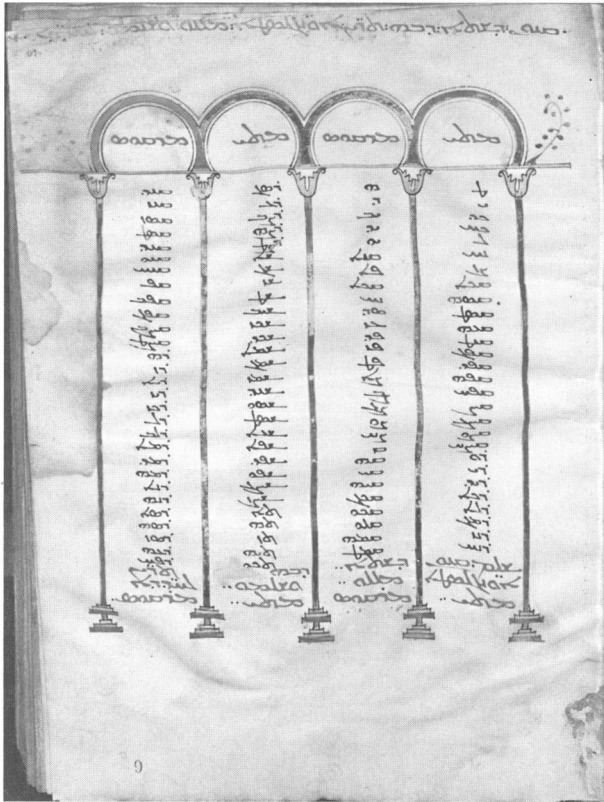


FIG. 24 Canon 6. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.58, Four Gospels, fol. 9a (photo courtesy of BML)

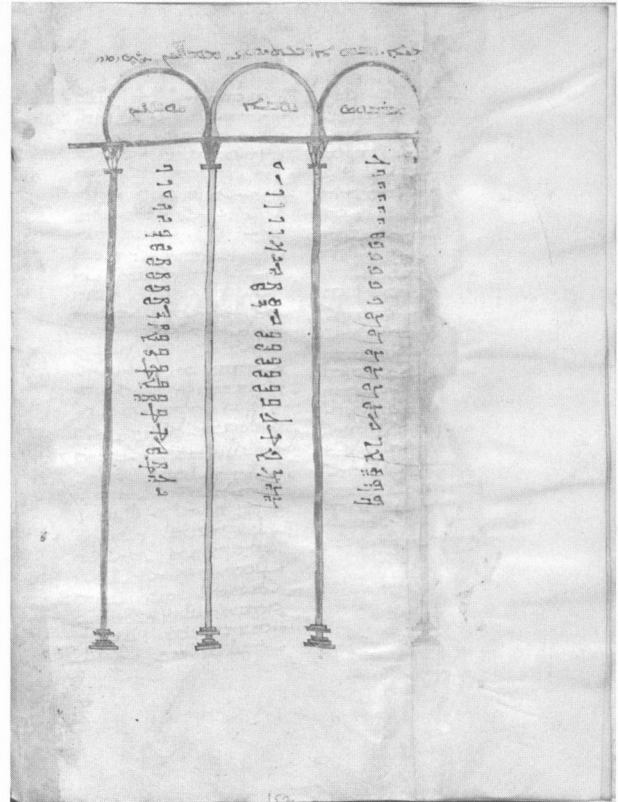


FIG. 25 Canon 1, table 1. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. plut. 1.40, Four Gospels, fol. 10b (photo courtesy of BML)

the diameters of the arches are consistent (3.2 cm); no compass points are visible, but arches have regular circumferences and do not intersect; architraves cross the arches from one end to the other; and the pedestals lie in the center of capitals. Color is expertly spread inside the borders of the architectural elements, and smears are rare. The writing of names and legends is refined as well: at canon 6 (fol. 9a) the standard closing sentence written in red ink (“It ends canon 6 where two Evangelists agreed with each other: Matthew, Mark”) is arranged in three lines between the columns. The Evangelists’ names, “Matthew, Mark,” are written twice, at the top and bottom of the vertical rows of numbers. A look at the corresponding canon 6 in the Rabbula concordances (fol. 9a; fig. 18) reveals that the names written on top of the vertical rows are in error: “Matthew, Mark, Luke, John,” are written in place of Matthew, Mark, Matthew, Mark, as if a page prepared for canon 1 was used for canon 6. Moreover, in

the Rabbula codex the standard closing sentences (“It ends canon 6 in which . . .”) is compressed in the bottom space between column three and column four, so that the names “Matthew, Mark,” do not occupy the bottom of their respective vertical rows of numbers, as they correctly do in cod. plut. 1.58. In sum, the Rabbula canons fall short of those in the modest cod. plut. 1.58.

We must yield before the facts that the date of 586 is related only to the Gospels the monk Rabbula wrote in the monastery of Saint John at Zagba, not far from Apamea. The folios with the illuminations, which have received the same date and have been for decades a solid landmark of the art of early Christian Syria, are still works from the sixth century, but their date of execution is uncertain. Further, we should be cautious about the provenance of folio 13 with the Crucifixion and Ascension from a Syriac manuscript. Because of these uncertainties, works of art dated on the basis of comparison with the miniatures in the Rabbula

Gospels should be reconsidered. These conclusions do not decrease the importance of the gatherings of miniatures handed down in the Rabbula manuscript: they are a unique witness of the high level of art production in sixth-century Syria. The use of gold in the canon tables reminds us that the commission was an important one, but the team of illuminators did not produce a masterpiece. We face a fragment of average quality, with marked unevenness. Other, less lavish and less well-known manuscripts from Syria display greater care and competence in the design and execution of their canon tables. The New Testament from which thirteen illuminated folios were taken and bound with

the Rabbula Gospels is undoubtedly one of many books that have been lost. It may have been routine work, not an exceptional commission.

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during the 2005–2006 campaign of physical and chemical analyses carried out by the Laboratorio di Fisica Applicata “Nello Caprara” of the Italian C.N.R., and the Laboratorio di Restauro della Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici di Firenze.